



## High church

In the mountaintop churches of Tigray, northern Ethiopia, Easter is still a week away. By William MacNamara

In a cave on a mountaintop in northern Ethiopia I meet a Christian monk reputed to be 140 years old. Even if this were true, he is markedly young compared to the relics hidden around him in these holy mountains. A few steps away from his hermit hole is a wooden door set flush against the rockface. It is the entrance to St Mary Korkor, one of more than 100 churches buried in the mesas of Tigray, in Ethiopia's far north.

Push open the church door and you enter the mountain. In the gloom of the nave are frescoes depicting scenes straight out of a Renaissance chapel: the Annunciation, the Last Supper, St George slaying the dragon. But the faces of Jesus and the saints are African, and they were painted 1,200 years ago. This region is a Christian heartland, familiar and yet fascinatingly different. Easter, for example, is celebrated with church services, then family get-togethers and meals – but not this weekend. Instead, it comes after a Lent fasting period of 56 days, on April 15 this year.

Tourists have long flocked to see the churches of Lalibela, 150 miles south, but Tigray is only now overcoming its infamy as the centre of the Ethiopian famines of the 1980s. It is a destination that offers a rare balance of historical, spiritual and outdoors adventures (often all in one excursion).

The mountain trails that climb to Tigray's most remote churches are so steep that rock-climbing skills are sometimes required. At one point I worried that my trainers were not up to the job but, at the most vertical stretch, I found a grandmother in sensible shoes with a baby on her back. She was finding her way up the cliff by pivoting between notches and cracks in the rockface. This is the way devout ladies in the region walk to mass.

Not all visitors see the magic in old churches, whether Ethiopian or Italian, but in Tigray there is an undeniable spiritual uplift from the landscape itself. This is a region of buttes and columns of rock rising hundreds of feet from the valley floor. The colours are clear and intense. Eagles perch in the lone tree on the ridge line.



Tigray is "big sky country" – as a Texas native, I have not seen a place more reminiscent of John Wayne's American southwest. The natural grandeur may explain the motives of the ancient church builders, who burrowed their sanctuaries into the awesome architecture of the mountains rather than build less inspiring mud structures at ground level.

There might have been more practical considerations too. Axum, which sits at an altitude of 2,131m in central Tigray and has a population of nearly 60,000, is Ethiopia's oldest city and the holiest city of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is also the former capital of the Axumite Empire, one of the most important civilisations of its time and a leading force in world trade between the first and seventh centuries. Ezana, the Axumite king, converted to Christianity in the fourth century (shortly after Emperor Constantine did the same in Rome) and made it the official religion of the empire, helping it spread south across what is modern Ethiopia. But, after the seventh century, the empire declined, prompting some to speculate that Axumites began hiding their churches on mountaintops outside the capital to keep them safe from intruders.

The churches remained all but unknown to the outside world until 1966, but today new roads and decent lodgings are opening up the region. Chinese road crews, which can be seen all over Ethiopia, have upgraded the highway running east from Axum towards the most famous churches. They still lie three hours' drive away but this beats several days' mule ride through cactus-lined ravines, as chronicled by Derla Murphy in her classic 1968 account, *In Ethiopia With a Mule*.

The Gheralta Lodge, close to the "Gheralta cluster" of churches, is helping put Tigray on the map for holidaymakers. Tigray's international visitors had previously been food-aid workers, correspondents covering famine and conflict, as well as adventurers such as Murphy. But in May 2007 a retired Italian engineer opened the Gheralta, the first luxury accommodation in the region, a low, sandstone ranch house with a garden at its centre. There is a deep porch that commands a view of cacti and mesas that purple as the day wears on. All that is missing are rocking chairs and a bottle of Dos Equis.

Silvio Rizzotti, the proprietor, delights guests with homemade Italian food. Ethiopian cuisine is one of the best reasons to spend time in the country but too many days of lamb stews, injera bread, and St George beer, named after Ethiopia's patron saint, can make anyone happy to see a basil and radicchio salad plucked from the lodge's garden.

Rizzotti points to waiting lists at his hotel in the high season from October to Easter as evidence of the growth of tourism in the area but this is relative – Tigray



**Serene** From top: the interior of the Church of St Mary Korkor in Ethiopia; a typical painting from one of Tigray's churches; climbing the path to St Mary Korkor



### A HONEYMOON WITH ...

## History and hedonism

A flight route launched last month has raised the prospect of Ethiopia becoming increasingly popular as a honeymoon destination. Ethiopian Airlines now flies direct from Addis Ababa, the capital, to Mahé, the largest island in the Seychelles, making it easy to create holiday itineraries combining the historic sights of the Ethiopian highlands with the paradise beaches and private-island resorts that have long been

favoured for post-wedding relaxation.

A typical schedule might begin in Addis, then involve a regional flight to the Tigray region, Lalibela, or the magnificent Simien mountains. After a few days hiking and visiting the ancient churches, tourists could then fly back to Addis Ababa and on to the Seychelles, a flight of four hours.

[www.flyethiopian.com](http://www.flyethiopian.com)

remains an off-the-radar destination, "booming" only in the sense that accommodation options have risen from one to two or three.

Agoro Lodge is a new hotel that Manos Unidas, a Spanish development organisation, has built in an effort to boost a local economy that is desperately poor. The lodge, which opened late last year, is near Adigrat on the Eritrea border. Géo-Découverte, a Swiss travel group, is building a tented camp near Gheralta Lodge and Smiling Ethiopia Travel is opening a hotel near Wukro, where another cluster of rock churches is located.

Even if Tigray were to become as well-accommodated as Lalibela, there is little danger of tourist overload. Even the best-known sites, such as the Church of St George in Lalibela, can feel like the Acropolis must have hundreds of years ago: no crowds, no kiosks, no safety rails, and the very real threat of falling off a ledge.

Guides are essential for any trip in Tigray, both to explain the religious art you are seeing and also to spot you while you are climbing up 70-degree inclines to get to it. I appreciated the encouragement of my guide Yitbarek Mamo while spider-splayed across the rockface on my journey up to St Mary Korkor. Hawks were soaring at eye level, ripping the quiet air. There was no hint that there would be anything at the top of the mountain, although a priest in a blue robe once emerged from a ledge above.

And there it was: a whitewashed entryway into the cliff face. Beside it was a group of Tigrayan women in white dresses and golden earrings carrying babies who were to be baptised at this especially holy church. Together we waited for the priest – a common pastime in Tigray – sitting under the shade of scrub trees and cacti. Farmers shared home-brewed beer with the men who were thirsty after the trip up the mountain. It was the hottest hour of the afternoon. But the air was so clear that the outskirts of Axum were visible 30 miles away.

Inside the church, the priest pointed to frescoes of Old Testament stories and explained them in the Tigrinya language. The frescoes are painted in a style that is lively and colourful but flat, like Byzantine iconography melded with Mexican folk art.

"Mikael, Maryam," said the priest, pointing to icons of an archangel and the Virgin Mary. On the frescoes nearby, the depiction of Adam and Eve was obvious, but next to it was an unfamiliar illustration of a king listening to a lyre player whose severed foot is spurting blood.

Having developed for centuries almost in isolation, Ethiopian Christianity has many singularities, as well as strong Jewish influences. It is the founding belief of Ethiopian Orthodoxy that the Ark of the Covenant resides in Axum, after the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon smuggled it there millennia ago. Every church is ordered around a *tabot* or replica of the ark.

Historians may emerge from these cave-like churches with more questions than answers. It is not clear why they were built.

I was worried my trainers were not up to the climb until I saw a grandmother in sensible shoes with a baby on her back

No one knows why this mountain or that mountain or indeed, this particular spot – in the case of St Mary Korkor a barren clearing on the edge of a cliff – was chosen as the place for such a difficult and beautiful undertaking. As for dates, the standard answer is that the Tigrayan rock churches were built in the fourth century, though others suggest the ninth. Ethiopia is short on archaeological work – much of the historical record perished when the monasteries were burned during the 16th century.

In many ways the sense of mystery only enhances the churches' power. And so it was with the ancient monk I met in the compound outside St Mary Korkor. Having been introduced, I was invited into the cave in which he lives. I was told with confidence about his 140 years, that he was a holy man, and that he had not been down to the valley in a very, very long time.

### Details

William MacNamara travelled with Red Jackal Tours ([www.red-jackal.net](http://www.red-jackal.net)), who offer a two-week trip from \$5,397, including guides and transfers. Yitbarek Mamo can be reached at [yitbarek3@yahoo.com](mailto:yitbarek3@yahoo.com). Gheralta Lodge ([www.gheraltalodgetigray.com](http://www.gheraltalodgetigray.com)) has doubles from 700 birr (£25). Journeys by Design ([www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)) also specialises in tailor-made trips to Ethiopia

## The expert selection

### No 16: Reinhold Messner's favourite treks

Regarded as the world's greatest living climber, **Reinhold Messner** (pictured) is the first person to climb all 14 mountains higher than 8,000m, and the first to climb Everest alone and without supplementary oxygen. Here he picks four favourite treks.

**Seti Khola, Nepal** There are so many possibilities for great treks around the world, and yet people are all



doing the same ones – Everest base camp, the Annapurna circuit, Kilimanjaro and Mont Blanc. Last year I guided 15 people on a trek in Nepal to an unknown valley to the east of Machapuchare, a 6,993m peak that has never been climbed and for me is the world's most beautiful mountain. You need at least two weeks, starting from Pokhara, approaching to the south of

Machapuchare and crossing into the Seti Khola valley to the east. There are no teahouses or huts so you have to camp and the whole time we were there we did not see one other tourist. The strange thing is that you can see it from Pokhara but it remains unexplored because it's not a famous trek. For information on trekking companies in Nepal visit [www.taan.org.np](http://www.taan.org.np)

**Tre Cime di Lavaredo, Italy** This is a very short trek – about six hours – around the base of five beautiful peaks in the Dolomites. As you

walk, you can normally look up and see climbers on the rocks above you. It's like an illustration of the evolution of rock climbing over the past



150 years – a guide can point out each different route, which were the hardest in the world when first climbed. And of course

**Historic** Tre Cime di Lavaredo in Italy

the landscape is absolutely stunning. [www.suedtirol.info](http://www.suedtirol.info)

**Hielo Continental Norte, Chile** This is one of the most beautiful treks I've ever done but it is very challenging. The Hielo Continental Norte is an ice field covering 1,600 sq m of Patagonia and this trek crosses it. You begin through forests, carrying tents and food, then climb on to the ice cap, being very careful to avoid crevasses. You need at least a week but it might take two because the weather can be terrible. The hardest bit is descending over the glaciers at the other



**Unexplored** Machapuchare in Nepal

**Nanga Parbat, Pakistan** This is the most scenic of any of the treks on the 8,000m peaks. I did it in 2005, starting at the Fairy Meadow campsite, then circling the mountain via the Rupal and Diamir base camps (the route Albert Mummery took in 1895) then on to the Indus valley and back to the start. It took a little less than three weeks, and you reach an altitude of just over 5,000m. [www.tourism.gov.pk](http://www.tourism.gov.pk)

For information on Messner's mountaineering museums in Italy, see [www.messner-mountain-museum.it](http://www.messner-mountain-museum.it)